

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

The Research Roundup column highlights recent research findings commissioned or generated by CIRCLE. Also included is an update on new CIRCLE products such as Fact Sheets, Survey Articles, Research Articles, Research Abstracts, Bibliographies,

THE BENEFITS OF OPEN DISCUSSION IN SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOMS

A new CIRCLE Working Paper by David Campbell explores the relationship between classroom environment and civic outcomes in high school students. Campbell, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Notre Dame, asks whether students are more affected by the quantity of social studies instruction they receive or by the quality of that instruction - measured in this case by student perceptions of classroom culture. He finds a correlation between student perceptions of an open classroom environment and both civic knowledge and expected civic participation. Campbell takes his investigation to a deeper level and explores the relationship between racial diversity and open classroom culture. He finds that high school students who attend racially diverse schools are less likely to report open classrooms; it seems that discussions of diverse or controversial opinions are more likely to occur in racially homogenous classrooms.

Campbell bases his analysis on data from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement or IEA Civic Education Study (CES). The CES is a school-based survey administered in twenty-eight participating nations. In the United States, ninth-grade students from 124 schools were sampled in the fall of 1999. Students were asked a broad range of questions measuring: the number of hours they spent in social studies or civics classes, their ability to interpret democratic concepts and principles, their perceptions of open classroom culture, their intent to vote, and their likelihood of participating in politics, community activities, and illegal protests.

In order to guard against the possibility that the most civically aware students would be the most likely to perceive open classrooms, Professor Campbell considered a student's individual perception of his or her classroom as well as the classroom's average score for open environment. The full methodology is explained in the Working Paper.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS MATTER

Campbell finds that the amount of time students spend in social studies classes does indeed correlate with their civic knowledge and their predictions for future civic engagement. However, he finds an even stronger correlation between student perceptions of open classroom environment and the intention to participate. A student's individual perception of their classroom's culture is strongly correlated with his or her expectations of vot-

ing, participating in politics, and being active in their communities. The aggregate measure of a classroom's openness, on the other hand, is strongly correlated with civic knowledge. In fact, when Campbell controls for open classroom environment, the

Campbell finds that the amount of time students spend in social studies classes does indeed correlate with their civic knowledge and their predictions for future civic engagement.

relationship between hours of social studies instruction and civic knowledge is no longer statistically significant. "The bottom line is...quality trumps quantity", explains Campbell. "The degree to which political and social issues are discussed openly and respectfully has a greater impact on civic proficiency than the frequency of social studies class."

CREATING RESPECTFUL CLIMATES

The study also considers whether racially diverse classrooms are more or less likely than homogenous classrooms to encourage open discussion. Campbell finds an inverse correlation between racial diversity and open discussion. In other words, black students are more likely to report open discussion when they attend majority-black schools and the same is true for white students.

According to Campbell, "Adding the potentially combustible dimension of a racially diverse student body likely only makes teachers more reluctant to hold such discussions." He adds that teachers should not be blamed for their reluctance, but suggests more can be done in schools to create respectful climates. "Teachers will only feel free to hold stimulating discussions when administrators and parents support them in their efforts to do so."

The complete Working Paper can be found on the CIRCLE Web site at www.civicyouth.org. ■